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WILL THE NOVEL DISAPPEAR?

BY JAMES LANE ALLEN, WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, HAMLIN GARLAND, HAMILTON W. MABIE, AND JOHN KENDRICK BANGS.

“‘Where do I think will the novelist of the future seek the plots and the environment for his novels?’

“Jules Verne leaned forward, and drummed gently on the table. ‘I do not think there will be any novels or romances, at all events in volume form, in fifty or a hundred years from now,’ he said. ‘They will be supplanted altogether by the daily newspaper, which has already now taken such a grip of the lives of the progressive nations.’

“‘But the romance, the novel, the descriptive story, the story historic, and the story psychological?’

“‘They will all disappear,’ said M. Verne. ‘They are not necessary, and even now their merit and their interest are fast declining. As historic records, the world will file its newspapers. Newspaper writers have learned to color every-day events so well that to read them will give posterity a truer picture than the historic or descriptive novel could do; and as for the novel psychological, that will soon cease to be, and will die of inanition in your own lifetime.’

“Here M. Jules Verne got excited. ‘I am second to no living man,’ he cried, ‘in my admiration of the greatest psychologist the world has ever known—Guy de Maupassant—and he, like all true geniuses, foresaw the trend of human ideas and needs, and wrote his stories in the smallest possible compass. Each one of De Maupassant’s soul studies is a concentrated lozenge of psychology. The De Maupassants who will delight the world in years to come will do so in the newspapers of the

day, and not in volumes, and they will, as you newspaper men express it, crystallize the psychology of the world in which they live by "writing up" the day-to-day events. The real psychology of life is in its news, and more truth—truth with a big T—can be gathered from the police-court story, the railway accident, from the every-day doings of the crowd, and from the battles of the future, than can be obtained if an attempt is made to clothe the psychological moral in a garb of fiction.'"—*From an interview with Jules Verne, printed in the London DAILY MAIL.*

I.

M. JULES VERNE is reported as thinking that the novel will disappear in fifty or a hundred years. He bares his reasons. Novels will not be needed; hence, there will be no novels. Novels are declining in merit; hence, there will be no novels. In future, there will be newspapers, and the world will file them as its historic records for posterity; hence, there will be no novels.

Whatsoever else a Frenchman may not be, when in earnest he is sure to be logical. The absence of logic here may conceivably be accounted for on the ground that M. Verne was not in earnest. He is a very keen, subtle, humorous Frenchman; he seems to have been in a playful mood; he may have wished to elude his interviewer; he is an old master of extravaganza and of hoax. Possibly, when the grave Englishman had captured these volatile statements and airy nothings, and taken leave, M. Verne may have shrugged his shoulders and congratulated himself that he is not an Anglo-Saxon. Any serious consideration of his views scarcely seems worth while.

Of course the novel is not going to disappear from the literature of the human race because M. Jules Verne possibly states that it will not be needed. The statement is commonly made now that the novel is not needed now. The statement was positively made a hundred years ago that the novel was not needed then. In every generation will be found persons of the highest authority (in other matters) to declare that stories of the imagination are not needed at any time. They settle the question for themselves. But they never settle it for the other portion of the human race, which insists that such stories are needed, always have been needed, always will be needed, for many reasons—one of these being that they add to the innocent and noble pleasures of life. The mind of the race in the past will continue to be the mind of the race in the future—on this subject: except that it will call more

and more for the development of the fine art of fiction to the end of time.

As to the second point, that novels are now declining in merit, and that hence hereafter there will be none, there is room for difference of opinion as to whether or not the novel is at present declining in all the countries that produce it. It is certainly declining in some. But suppose it to be declining everywhere. Must the conclusion follow that it will keep on declining everywhere till it is finally extinct? Once in Greece dramatic literature declined in merit. Once in Italy the art of writing history declined in merit. Once in France comedy declined in merit. Repeatedly in England novel-writing has declined in merit. But not one of these kept on declining everywhere. The history of no art is a long dead level or a long dead gain. It consists of movements, of periods of *renascence* and *decadence*. If the novel were now declining in merit throughout the world, in such a fact would lie the simple presumption that in the future it will be revived.

As to the third point—that the race will in future read newspapers, instead of novels, and will file the former as its best records for posterity—it might be suggested that posterity has nothing to do with the question. Newspapers are not issued as documents for posterity. One might as well say that the mastodon lived in order that its bones could be filed in a museum as a document for the zoölogist. If any novelist ever wrote a novel in order that the historian of posterity might find in it a document, he may be sure that such a historian is the only person who will ever read it. Neither newspapers nor novels are written for posterity. They may thus come into competition when they are dead, but so long as they are alive they no more interfere with each other than eating and drinking. While you eat you cannot drink, while you drink you cannot eat. But most people like to do both. It would be as reasonable to declare that the sounds which constitute noise will hereafter supplant the sounds which constitute music.

JAMES LANE ALLEN.

II.

Most men now nearing the Psalmist's limit will readily recall how in their hot youth there was much talk of the novel and its very immediate evanescence. The talk was more in print than

out of it, for the notion was one of those that people like to scare themselves with, while keeping a safe corner of unbelief below that surface mind which is chiefly employed in the higher journalism. They could bring plentiful proof of it in their articles and essays, but when it came to urging the notion by word of mouth, in the face of immeasurable and undiminished novel-reading around them, they were mostly mute. The year 1870, say, no more marked a decline in fiction, or in the passion for it, than any other year of our era, or any of those years of the world that run back to the beginning. The cave-dweller, sitting at his cavern door in the cool of the evening, and absently picking out the simple chords of stone-age music on the sinews stretched upon the thigh-bone of the brother he had eaten, listened with the same rapture to the tarradiddles of some gifted neighbor as the twentieth-century maiden feels in hanging over the page of the largest-selling book of the actual summer; and when time is getting ready to be no more, the Last Man shall say to the Next to the Last, "Now that we are not likely to be interrupted, here is a little thing of mine in three volumes that I would like to read you before we die"; and the Next to the Last Man will gather himself into an attitude of comfortable attention, and cling to each fleeting breath in the hope that the universal asphyxiation will spare him till he knows whether They get married.

It is our strong conviction of these facts which has enabled us to read with less alarm than we otherwise might an interview with M. Jules Verne which the London *Daily Mail* has printed, concerning the future of the novel. It is M. Verne's opinion that the novel has no future, but is destined, within the next century, "to be supplanted altogether by the daily newspaper, which has already taken such a grip of the progressive nations." He thinks that the world will soon begin to file its newspapers, as historic records, and that the reporters of every-day events have already begun "to color them so that they will give posterity a truer picture than the historic novel," and we agree with him that this might easily be. The average reporting on its own plane is certainly much better art than the average historical novelling, but the reporter will have still to refine very much upon his methods if he is to do the effect of the psychological fiction which M. Verne says men now living shall see the end of.

We think M. Verne reasons from particulars to generals with

too bold a despair. He himself formerly wrote a kind of fiction which we ourselves found entirely delightful: frank, fearless in design, scientific in its facts, inherently impossible, but preserving a respect for probability at every step, convincing of its reality by the author's air of absolute sincerity, and embodying a sort of rude, elementary character with a charming bonhomie—we should willingly have had it go on forever. But apparently the rest of the world would not, and no one thinks now of reading a Jules Verne novel any more than M. Jules Verne thinks of writing one. But because there shall be no more *Fur Countries* and *Hector Servadacs*, and *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*, and *Mysterious Islands*, shall there be no more cakes and ale? Aye, but there shall, and the ginger shall be hot in the mouth still. M. Verne has naturally argued from his own case, but he has not the less mistakenly done so; and incapable himself of the psychological novel, he has ingenuously but erroneously accused it of inanition. In his impatience with this, the supreme type of fiction, he has said in his heart, "There shall be no more fiction," and he no doubt believes it.

But, clearly, M. Verne has taken the passing of a manner of fiction for the passing of fiction itself. As this never had a knowable beginning, it will never have a knowable end. Novels of adventure, novels of character, novels of fashionable life, novels of crime and novels of its detection, novels of art and novels of business, novels of incident and novels of analysis—they all come and they all go,

"And change, and pass, and turn again,"

but the novels remain; and it is probable that the psychological novel will be the most enduring as it has been the most constant phase of fiction. Every other kind of novel lives or dies by so much or so little psychology as it has in it. Plots are really nothing as to vitality. They are all so shop-worn that it is wonderful anyone has the face to take them down from the shelf and offer them to a customer. Every moving accident, by flood, by fire, by frost, by falls from precipices, and by fights in imminent deadly breaches, by midnight burglaries and noonday robberies, has been used again and again, so that but for the renewal of the race from generation to generation the dealer in them would be mobbed at his counter. That which is as forever new as to-mor-

row morning, and much newer than to-morrow morning's paper, is the fascination of man for man, not to say the fascination of man for woman, or the reverse. Who cares for a frightful catastrophe, when he can have a divorce case? Who would prefer a battle in the Philippines to an engagement in Newport? What is a murder compared to a murder trial? In the catastrophe, and the battle, and the murder, we have the gross impersonal fact, the material of that novel of incident which is dead or dying, except in the interest of the innocent and the vulgar; and in the divorce, the engagement, the trial, we have the psychological romance which M. Verne is so much mistaken in supposing about to perish.

It is imperishable. Wherever two human beings, or twenty, meet, it springs up and flourishes from their talk. It hangs its orchid blossoms from stems rooted in the viewless air, and yet this divine miracle is as common as the grass under our feet. Listen to the gossips over their afternoon tea, or when they meet with their milk-pails in the lane at twilight, and as soon as they begin the old, eternal question of their neighbors, and their affairs, and their motives, you have the psychological novel, which shall never die. No, dear M. Jules Verne, there never was a person more widely astray in his premises or farther from the truth in his conclusions than you, either as to the novel in general or the psychological novel in particular. Even the poor, despised historical novel is fast grounded in the ignorance and imbecility of the race, and it will not be superseded by the newspaper story, or by every-day fact masking as fiction. The reporter's coloring may be no cruder than the romancer's, but his work is necessarily more hurried. He writes with the hungry linotyper at his elbow, ready to digest his material into type, and the press vibrating with impatience for his tale, which must be unvarnished, however vividly tinted. He is a good fellow, the reporter, and far better than some people would have him believe, but his art in its honesty is not invention; and when it becomes so, it is false and bad. He can very well develop on his own lines; there is ever so much outcome in him; but any one, even an aging and outworn novelist, who would have him believe that he is in any wise akin to the novelist, or even to the lowly historian, flatters him to his undoing.

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS.

III.

As usual, M. Jules Verne has given us food for reflection in pronouncing the doom of the novel, but I for one, though willing to admit that the novel will change (nothing in this world is more certain than change), am not convinced that the merit and interest of the novel are declining, nor that they are being subordinated by the newspapers. Seventy-five years ago the newspapers were few and small, and without dramatic interest, and there were not a half-dozen novels of any circulation in this country. To-day there are thousands of editions and millions of copies circulated every year. The newspapers have made corresponding growth. They circulate in billions, in tons. They long ago cut into the magazine field with their Sunday editions, but I do not find that they have cut into the circulation of the novel; on the contrary, they have widened the dominion of the novel by educating readers from devouring fact to consuming the novelists' artistic recreation of fact. I am willing to admit also that fiction is becoming each day more widespread, more democratic, and less of a set academic performance—in short, that it is becoming each day more contemporaneous. But I think M. Verne confuses the newspaper's function as a medium of conveying fiction to its readers with the actual production of the novel. As a means of dispersing literature the daily newspaper is likely to become all-important, but the production of the novel will go on quite independently of any medium of transmission. The reading public will produce the change, and there is no indication in America to-day that the public of the novelist is decreasing; rather would it seem that fiction is but just laying hold upon the millions living outside the circles of professed patrons of literature. Our people seem disposed not only to read the fiction of the world—of the past—but are ready to devour all that pours from our presses. Apparently the era of big circulation for novels has but begun. As to the *form* in which fiction will circulate—that is another question. There are, I believe, fewer stories printed serially in the newspapers now than ten years ago. The story syndicates are passing rather than coming on.

As to the truth and power of newspaper delineation of the facts of human life, I think M. Verne is in the wrong, so far as America is concerned. Our papers grow each day more instantaneous, and their views of life are like snap-shots by means of a kodak. Edi-

tion follows edition like reports from a Gatling gun. The thunder of the presses is incessant. Fiction, in the true sense of the word—calm and fateful delineation of human life—will never come from the swarming offices of our metropolitan dailies, but they may print and distribute stories as good as the best. The snap-judgment of the reporter seeking sensation and dealing with the abnormal in human life will never become a dangerous rival to the novelist who works at leisure and in repose, verifying what he writes from week to week as his story unrolls. From the sociological stand-point, the newspaper deals too largely with crime, with the abnormal, the diseased, to be in any sense a true chronicle of our time. The really dangerous rival of the novel, in my judgment, is the drama. We are soon to have an enormous revival of dramatic delineation of human life—a new drama, vivid, swift, humorous, and absolutely contemporaneous. Our ever-increasing centres of population demand the drama, and they will have it. The theatre is to be the rival of both fiction and journalism.

HAMLIN GARLAND.

IV.

M. Jules Verne, who has made effective use of modern methods and discoveries to give fiction journalistic interest, is reported to have expressed the opinion that there will be no "novels or romances, at all events in volume form, in fifty or a hundred years from now. . . . They will be supplanted altogether by the daily newspaper, which has already taken such a grip of the lives of the progressive nations. . . . They are not necessary, and even now their merit and their interest are fast declining."

M. Verne is always imaginative, and sometimes interesting; but neither as a critic of literature nor as a prophet of things to come has he yet established his authority. Men have been telling one another stories since the first days when they met at springs or places of barter; the story is, in all literatures, one of the earliest literary forms; it is, in almost all literatures to-day, the most vital and popular form. The early story-tellers began by being entertaining; that was their only duty and their most engaging quality; the story-tellers of to-day are studying every condition of human life and every form of human experience. The novel has not only gained immensely in all the qualities of good workmanship, but it has sunk its roots into the depths of

modern life. At the moment no books are so widely read as novels, and the recent sales of popular stories have been so entirely beyond all former records that they have alarmed those anxious persons who are always expecting the decline of serious writing, and perplexed those who thought they knew something about the purchasing capacity of the American public. It may be that the novel is about to expire in a blaze of popularity, but it is more probable that M. Jules Verne has been making another journey to the moon. It is a course of travel which literary prophets have taken before his day and will continue to take to the end of time. It is an amusing and interesting journey, and it is free from expense.

The fact seems to be that the love of the story is born in every child because he has no imagination and does not know precisely what is coming to him in the way of good or evil fortune. Men instinctively dramatize their experience because they have discovered that life is not a series of unrelated happenings, that one thing flows out of another, that the grapes which the fathers eat must be digested by the children, that a man's deeds have a way of lying in wait for him long after he has forgotten them, and that it is the unexpected which happens. So long as life is dramatic and men have imagination they will delight to tell and to hear stories, and the dreadful possibility of a world in which the *Arabian Nights* and *Vanity Fair* have been expelled by the newspapers may be dismissed.

HAMILTON W. MABIE.

V.

I quite agree with M. Jules Verne in his prophecy that the novel is passing, and that in a hundred years from now there will be no such form of literature, or at least not as we know it. History is being made so rapidly nowadays, events are piling up so quickly and in such enormous quantity, that the men and women of the future will have no time to read the story, which, whatever its intrinsic motives, is, after all, *pour passer le temps*. It will require all the leisure of that future public to keep abreast of their own times, and consequently the novel will cease to exist, unless, of course, the ideal publisher who publishes just for the fun of it comes into being with other improvements of the age—which is a doubtful prospect. Nevertheless, the same thirst for the story

of love and life which is inherent in our weak human nature will be as strong as ever, and it will be satisfied by the genius of the future, just as our present-day geniuses are satisfying all the immediate aspirations of men. If wireless telegraphy, why not bookless romances, typeless novels, pageless poems? We already have jokeless comic papers. These things are surely coming, and I foresee the day when without novels, poetry, or drama the public will be surfeited with romances and tales of the most stirring character; poems of stately measure and uplifting concept; psychological studies of the deepest dye; and dramas that will take the soul of man and twist it until it fairly shrieks for mercy—and all of these things men and women will get while they sleep. It is my impression that the literature of that period will be induced by pills taken before retiring and acting immediately thereafter. The man who wants a poem of a certain kind will swallow what, for the lack of a better term, we may call “The Alfred Austin Pellet,” and live the resulting poem in his dreams. Then there will be “Caine’s Capsules for Creepy Creatures,” each guaranteed to contain ten grains of gloom, and absolutely free from humor, lightness, sunshine, or other deleterious substances, and which, taken three times a day, will enable every man to be his own “Manxman.” In the drama “The Belasco Tabloid” will induce dreams that will make Du Barry seem like a Rollo book in contrast, and so it will go. Some clever druggist will meet the literary necessities of the hour, and put up all the literature that anybody can possibly want in small doses, in every variety, and at a price which will bring it within the reach of all. It will be a great boon, and will enable thousands of men who might otherwise have been novelists, poets, or playwrights to turn their back on letters and take up some really useful occupation.

JOHN KENDRICK BANGS.